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ABSTRACT

Observations directed primarily toward future teachers of English concerning a 10-year investigation of freshman student attitudes toward their secondary school English training in retrospect are presented in this article. Based on the patterns of responses evident in the anonymously written student criticisms, the author comments on three critically weak areas: (1) High school English classes are not sufficiently well disciplined to allow for satisfactory achievement; (2) Composition assignments are too infrequent and too often poorly planned to develop acceptable writing skills; and (3) Grading systems are not realistic, causing students to feel more accomplished than they are, and thereby contributing directly to incompetence. A generous selection of the student criticism supports the author's analysis. (RL)

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High School English in Retrospect

LURENE BROWN

WHEN I BEGAN teaching Methods of Teaching High School English, I realized that yearly I would also be meeting at least 150 freshmen who could help me more than anyone else in determining the content of a Methods course. They were last year's high school seniors, the incredibly poor spellers, the illogical, the inarticulate, the unread, the writers of comma splices and fragments. They frequently made creditable grades in college except for the D's and F's in English, grades which they could not understand because, "I got all A's and B's in high school." They were willing to help me; and now, some 1500 students later, I feel that I have at least a few of the answers to the question of how to prepare future teachers.

In asking my freshmen to comment on their experiences in high school English I hoped merely to learn first hand what they themselves considered the weaknesses and strengths in their backgrounds and to offer students in my Methods classes some help and encouragement. Having taught high school English, I am too well aware of the difficulties—the too-large classes, the endless grading, the lack of support and appreciation, and the frequent sense of futility—to be looking for an opportunity to criticize.

Students who wrote of their high school work did so as an optional assignment on which they knew they would not be graded. They had ample time to consider the matter since this was one paper which could come in any time. They were told not to identify themselves, their schools, or their teachers; to consider the program as a whole; to be objective; to be fair. As a result, the comments were thoughtful and sensible. Never in the years that I solicited student help was there a paper which I considered biased or malicious.

Many freshmen assumed their share of the blame for their language deficiencies:

> I wish I could have realized in school just how important English is. Somehow I just didn't see how English beyor l everyday communication was necessary.
>
> My high school can take some of the blame for its students not learning English, but the students, themselves, deserve more blame . . .
>
> I can honestly say I was my own weakness. I had the opportunity and the time but did not take full advantage of it.

They were willing to assume some of the responsibility, but not willing to take it all. They recognized misplaced emphasis in their schools:

> The teachers were qualified—in fact I would say they were very good, but my school was dominated by sports. By that I mean that the majority of the boys played on the school sports teams and passing grades were given to them regardless of what these boys actually learned. This trend in school caused the teachers to give simple grammar tests so that the team members could pass. We seldom wrote themes in school because most of the boys could not pass these themes.

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Students were aware of the need for a four-year English requirement:

> I think the one thing the English Department did not do which they should have was to require us to take English four years.

They recognized the lack of organized effort in the teaching of spelling:

> The grammar was well organized, but the spelling was sort of haphazard.

Over and over they mentioned the "endless repetition" of material they had first studied in junior high school, a charge which I am trying to avoid for my Methods students by introducing them to the careful plan of organized teaching of grammar in Robert C. Pooley's, *Teaching English Grammar.*

Many repeated in their own way the comment of the student who said that the English teachers "depended too much on workbooks":

> The students have a workbook, but most of them either copy or do it in class while the correct answer is being read.
>
> The thing I objected to most were some of the workbook exercises. Many of them were a waste of time. They only repeated the same simple rules over a thousand times. It would have been more effective to learn rules directly from a grammar book and apply these to your own writing instead of correcting some obvious errors in the workbook.
>
> Most students could completely analyze the grammar in the exercise book; however, few were able to apply (it) in college themes. This was due to the fact that students were never required to write anything on their own. Each student knew the rules on the grammar test but never applied them in use. If one never has to organize his thoughts, he does not know how this is to be done. The students in English in my high school never had the practice of writing, therefore they never learned how to write a well organized paper . . . . We left high school not knowing how to write and without the will to read.

Unable to cite contributing factors, but startlingly honest, was the person who said:

> I have a problem with spelling, choice of words, and grammar. I guess this covers the whole course.

As the pages of comments accumulated over the years, however, a pattern began to emerge; and as I became increasingly aware of the references to "too much cutting up in class" and "a lack of discipline in my English class," I began to understand that a majority of the students associated their failure to learn with the teacher's failure to control the class. From the hundreds of papers I have read came these statements:

> We never had homework and our teacher, a man, didn't seem to be able to keep the class under control . . . Mr. X was a good teacher, but he talked too much.
>
> One of the greatest things my high school lacked was discipline.
>
> The class did anything but listen to her.
>
> My fourth year was by far the worst. We learned nothing. The students ruled the class.
>
> I had three years of English and out of these three years I consider two of them completely wasted because the teacher was more interested in telling jokes than teaching English . . . My freshman teacher was wonderful, and I can thank her for my English background.
>
> My Junior teacher instead of disciplining her students only made threats. No one felt as if he accomplished anything that year.
>
> There were certain weaknesses in my high school English course. Among them was the disinterest of the pupils, due to the lack of discipline of the instructor. Another was the huge assignments that we received. All of us knew that if none of us did what was assigned, the instructor couldn't say too much.
>
> There was no interest in getting things across. The people in class talked all the time and cheating was accepted as was unrespectfulness of the teacher.
>
> He spent more time trying to discipline the class than teaching it.

Criticisms of another kind, which appeared on almost every paper, could hardly be ignored:

. . . too much time spent in the study of rules with no application of the rules.

. . . too much literature and not enough composition.

Later, as I found repeated complaints that there had been no theme "inside of class or outside" and that college offered the first experience in theme writing, I knew that the second major weakness was inadequate training in composition. Students wrote as follows:

We did too much diagraming and *no* theme writing. All the time I was in high school I never once wrote a theme.

I thought I was lucky not having to do any term papers and having very few themes to write. I now discover that I was wrong in feeling this way because I have to do both and know very little about them except for ideas in the text.

We were taught grammar rather well but were not taught how to use it.

I had never written a theme before coming to college. During the senior year the teacher told us we would have a term paper to be handed in toward the end of the year. He was going to help us with these papers, tell us how to go about gathering information, read the paper with us, etc. After a few weeks he told us to forget the papers, he didn't feel like taking the time. So I have had no preparation on writing.

I now know that for a college preparatory student it is best to write more in high school. The only way that a person can really learn to write is by using a pen.

I never wrote one theme until I came to college. This I believe was the main fault. We read literature and worked on grammar constantly and never had a chance to put the things together in written form.

If I should have to choose one thing to be stressed in high school English, it would certainly be theme writing.

A final comment on stress on composition serves also as the introduction to the third and last outstanding weakness of which students were aware—grading. It was this:

The one thing I think should be done more is that more themes should be written *in class* with more comments on the paper when it is handed back.

Students generally seemed to feel cheated if papers which had been handed in were not graded and returned, if papers were not marked in such a way that *A's* and *C's* and *F's* seemed justified:

I wish the teachers had been less lenient in their grading. In high school I made *A's* in English.

It was actually too easy to get grades because of low class curves.

In general high school teachers are too lenient in grading. Thus one may rank high in the class, but the class standard is not high enough.

On themes and research papers that were handed in nothing was taken off for grammatical mistakes. Since I have been in college almost everything has been strange to me.

The grading standards of the department were too low. Most students received too much credit for their work. This, of course, led students to assume that their knowledge of English was much greater than it really was.

Although we wrote a great deal in and outside of class, the emphasis in grading was on the quality of content and the originality of idea, rather than on spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Because we knew we would be penalized little for these mistakes, we lacked the motivation to become proficient in mechanics of English.

My background in writing is such that I am embarrassed to even talk about it. I now realize that the *A's* I got on themes in high school would have been *F's* in college. The teachers would not grade the grammatical errors but merely the contents of the theme.

In the senior year we also had to write term papers but these papers were not graded stiffly enough. Even papers which were plagiarized were passed. I guess the department just didn't spend enough time in the grading of papers.

. . . high school teachers taught very well except . . . they appeared to hand out passing grades to anyone who attended class regularly whether the students learned anything or not.

My only criticism is . . . that in the four years of English I took in high school I was asked to write many many themes but I always seemed to receive the same grade on all. I was never given any reason for my grades, and was never able to find out exactly what was missing in my papers that prevented me from making higher grades.

The students were critical. They were also perceptive:

Several times I would get the feeling that a couple of my teachers didn't know what they were talking about.

The English teachers in my high school, well worn by years of pushing students into knowledge and watching them bounce back without even a bump of thought on their heads, had laxed in their ways. No interest in the subject for the students was created by the teachers.

The personality of the teacher had the most influence . . . I believe that the real trick to educating students is to get them to think and to get them to want to learn.

That they were also keenly aware of good teaching and appreciative of the instructors who had helped them is evident in dozens of their responses, some of which I am including here:

At the time I felt that she was too hard, but now that I am in college, I realize that she wasn't nearly hard enough.

There were many times in high school when I thought my English teacher was mean to give the long assignments that she did. I realize now that all this work was for my own good, and I am going to thank her the first chance I get.

'Don't get Mr. So-So. He makes you write so many themes,' is the best complaint that a tough teacher could ever receive.

My Junior English course was excellent. My teacher was superb! She was the teacher who aroused my interest and appreciation of poetry, novels, short stories, and good books. We were required to read all of these and analyze each of them. We wrote a theme a week. Everything had to be perfect: spelling, punctuation, sentences, organization, etc. . . Although I liked my English teacher very much, at times I thought she was unreasonable . . . But she was preparing us for college, and now I'm very grateful to her.

He gave longer and harder assignments than the other teachers, but now as I look back on it I am glad that he did.

Having completed my ten-year project, I feel that I have some of the answers I need—though admittedly not all of them. If we can take seriously what the freshmen say, the path for prospective teachers is rather clearly marked: Well-disciplined classes, regular and carefully planned composition work, and a demanding and conscientious system of grading. It is not hard to train Methods students to keep their charges so pleasantly and firmly busy that they have no time to be discipline problems; to remind them that the sentence-a-day, the journal which can be spot-checked, and the theme which challenges an opinion are just a few of the ways to keep students writing; that careful grading of many pieces of writing *and* survival are both possible if a teacher staggers writing assignments and utilizes his time.

Obviously, though, this is not enough. In the refreshing honesty of the appraisal of their high school work, the students have inadvertently revealed their own worth, their urgent need of teachers who will not only deal intelligently with fundamentals, but help them "locate the stars to which they hitch their wagons." Because the students clearly deserve more help than they are getting, their comments, if they serve no other purpose, should encourage the best efforts of all of us who have any part in the training of potential teachers of English.

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